



JOINT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (ENVIRONMENT & SUSTAINABILITY AND HOUSING & REGENERATION)

MINUTES OF THE MULTI-LOCATIONAL MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE AND VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON THURSDAY, 28TH JULY 2022 AT 5.00 P.M.

PRESENT

Councillor D.T. Davies – Chair

Councillors:

M.A. Adams, R. Chapman, Mrs P. Cook, D. Cushing, C.J. Cuss, N. Dix, C. Elsbury, M. Evans, Mrs C. Forehead, A. Gair, A. Hussey, S. Kent, C.P. Mann, A. McConnell, B. Owen, L. Phipps, D.W.R. Preece, H. Pritchard, J.A. Pritchard, J.E. Roberts, A. Whitcombe, S. Williams, J. Winslade, C. Wright

Also in attendance: Councillor K. Etheridge

Cabinet Members:

S. Morgan (Leader of Council), S. Cook (Housing), E. Forehead (Social Care), J. Pritchard (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Prosperity, Regeneration and Climate Change), J. Simmonds (Highways and Transportation), Mrs E. Stenner (Finance and Performance)

Together with:

M. Lloyd (Head of Infrastructure), C. Campbell (Transportation Engineering Manager), C. Forbes-Thompson (Scrutiny Manager), R. Barrett (Committee Services Officer), S. Hughes (Committee Services Officer)

RECORDING, FILMING AND VOTING ARRANGEMENTS

The Chair reminded those present that the meeting was being live-streamed and recorded and would be made available following the meeting via the Council's website – [Click Here to View](#). Members were advised that voting on decisions would be taken via Microsoft Forms.

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G. Ead, L. Jeremiah, W. Williams, and Cabinet Members N. George and P. Leonard, together with M.S. Williams (Corporate Director for Economy and Environment).

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received at the commencement or during the course of the meeting.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following report.

3 CAERPHILLY COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL CAR PARKS TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Cath Forbes-Thompson (Scrutiny Manager) presented the report, which informed the Joint Scrutiny Committee of the findings of the Joint Task and Finish Group that was established to review car parks managed by Caerphilly County Borough Council. The Scrutiny Committee were asked to consider a number of recommendations made by the Task and Finish Group as set out in Sections 3.2 to 3.6 of the report and determine its recommendations to Cabinet ahead of its meeting on 21st September 2022.

The Joint Scrutiny Committee were advised of the extensive research and work carried out to inform the findings of the Task and Finish Group, which had undergone three iterations and had been specifically asked to consider car parking charges that were suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Joint Scrutiny noted details of the members of the Task and Finish Group which were listed at Sections 5.2 and 5.3 of the report, together with the Group's terms of reference and methodology which were detailed in the report at Section 5.4 and agreed *"To review town centre car parking charges in view of the effects of the pandemic on the high street economy"*. The Group agreed that the focus would be on the main towns in the county borough, namely Bargoed, Blackwood, Caerphilly, Newbridge, Risca and Ystrad Mynach.

When the Group met, they agreed to review available research, including reports published by Welsh Government containing information on car parking strategies, and details of these were listed in the report. The Group also reviewed previous reports produced by the previous iterations of the Car Park Task and Finish Group to see previous recommendations and work that had been carried out to date.

The Task and Finish Group agreed to carry out a public survey of visitors to the main town centres in the county borough and also agreed a number of questions to be put to the business community in the town centres. The survey was carried out and shared via social media and by members of the Task and Finish Group, and a very good response to the survey was received, with a total of 1545 responses received. The Group also received narrative comments on individual experiences since car parking charges were suspended. A number of questions were also developed by the Group which were shared through a separate business survey that was distributed by the Business and Enterprise Renewal Team. The results of these surveys were set out in Section 5 of the report.

The Group also reviewed the income and costs associated with running the car parks, and details of these were set out at Section 5.8 of the report. It was noted that these figures reflected the income that was generated before charging was suspended due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In terms of the conclusions of the Group, they agreed that their priority was to ensure that car parks spaces are available for visitors to the town centres when they are needed. Members therefore suggested two options for the Scrutiny Committee to consider, both offering a reduced initial cost for parking for either one hour or two hours, with the overall aim to

encourage people to visit the towns whilst also ensuring turnover of spaces in busier car parks:

- **Option 1** - First hour 40p with subsequent hours at the existing tariff; or
- **Option 2** - First 2 hours 40p with subsequent hours at the existing tariff.

It was noted that the other recommendations in the report were ancillary to this main recommendation, but highlighted that any changes to the charging tariffs would take approximately 8 to 10 weeks to implement, and therefore Cabinet might therefore wish to consider if they wish to extend the suspension of free parking whilst the changes are implemented. The recommendations also took into account the funding loss to the Highway Services budget if either option were to be approved by Cabinet and made a recommendation for additional funding dependent on the preferred option of the Scrutiny Committee in respect of the initial hourly charge. The Group also recommended that an impact report be provided to Scrutiny Committee 12 months after the implementation of the changes if approved, to review the changes and see if they have had the desired impact.

Councillor J. Pritchard (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Prosperity, Regeneration and Climate Change) addressed the Scrutiny Committee as the previous Cabinet Member and consultee for the report and thanked the cross-party Task and Finish Group for the work undertaken and their efforts in producing the set of recommendations for consideration. The Cabinet Member welcomed the proposed options for charging at a reduced rate and viewed these as a reasonable and balanced step towards addressing the issues raised by local businesses and members of the public in relation to the cessation of parking charges and a subsequent increase in vehicular movements

Councillor J. Simmonds (Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation) also addressed the Scrutiny Committee and summarised the background to the establishment of the Task and Finish Group and its various iterations and outcomes since 2016, together with an overview of its terms of reference and methodology.

Marcus Lloyd (Head of Infrastructure) was invited to comment on the report and he highlighted to the Scrutiny Committee that in respect of the estimated loss of income based on previous charging, it was unclear if parking patterns would change as a result of a lower fee, and therefore the figures set out at Section 5.8 were estimated examples only. In addition, he explained that any changes to the new machines would require an 8 to 10 week lead in for the software to be updated, and so if Cabinet were minded to approve the recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee, then this lead-in period would end very close to Christmas 2022, when traditionally free parking is offered for the Christmas trading period. Therefore, Mr Lloyd suggested that any changes come into effect from January 2023, and he asked Members to consider this as an additional recommendation if they were minded to support either of the options for a lower initial charging fee.

The Scrutiny Committee discussed the report and a Member asked if an exception would be made to provide blue badge holders with a lower charge for an additional hour. Clive Campbell (Transportation Engineering Manager) confirmed that this would be the case, in that as part of the existing tariffs, blue badge holders already have an additional hour granted on top of whatever tariff they pay to make suitable allowances for their visit.

A Member welcomed the re-introduction of charges to alleviate parking issues in busy high streets, and asked if there is a grace period in place if users exceed the time paid for by a matter of minutes. Mr Campbell explained that the Council allow for a small element of discretion in terms of enforcement, and that although strictly speaking, anything over the time paid for is eligible for a penalty charge notice, civil parking enforcement (CPE) Officers are encouraged to be proactive in terms of their response to late arrivals. However, he emphasised that it is far cheaper for the public to pay for an extra hour of parking than it would be to pay for a penalty charge notice if they were to exceed this margin of discretion.

Members asked if the upgraded pay and display machines would be able to accept card payments moving forward. Mr Campbell confirmed that the new equipment had already been upgraded to accept card payments but that these had been installed some time back and the suspension of charges had come into effect before these machines came into operation. Therefore, the machines would need to be commissioned and tested and any necessary adjustments to tariffs made before they come into operation, which was the reason for the 8 to 10 week lead in time recommended in the report. Mr Campbell also responded to a query regarding card processing charges payable by the Authority and confirmed this would be in the region of 5%.

Individual Members referred to the popularity of the Twyn car park in Caerphilly town centre and the parking issues experienced as a result, and asked if there were any available avenues to encourage parking in nearby car parks which are underused (such as Crescent Road car park) and whether a cheaper rate could be introduced at these sites to encourage their use and free up the Twyn car park for short stays. Mr Campbell explained that encouraging people to use outer-lying car parks has been acknowledged as a long-standing issue, and that the Authority continues to promote the long-stay facilities which have a cheaper overall rate, but that under the "Caerphilly 2035" programme, it is the intention to review the parking strategy within Caerphilly Town Centre and so it is hoped that options to address this issue can be explored going forward.

A Member asked if the reintroduction of parking charges and the enforcement by the CPE team would lead to a shortfall in parking enforcement resources elsewhere (such as in residential areas). This matter was discussed at length later in the meeting and Officers confirmed that the CPE team would be limited to current resources and Members were reminded of the competing pressures and demands on enforcement time, although residential parking permit areas, town centres and car parks are given priority. It was explained that any increase in resources would come at a cost as there is no guarantee that the income received from penalty charges would cover additional staffing/service costs. The Member expressed concerns that CPE officers would have to visit car parks on an hourly basis to enforce any overstay and so their activities would be centred around town centre car parks.

The Member sought clarification on whether consideration had been given to employing a specific CPE team to deal solely with car park enforcement which would free up CPE officers elsewhere to carry out day to day parking enforcement in other areas. Mr Lloyd confirmed that the CPE team had been introduced as a result of a detailed business case which considered the level of income that could be accrued based on penalty charge notices. It was explained that the income was intended to cover the costs of the service but was not meant to generate additional income over and above these costs, and that the service was introduced around 12 months before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the intention being to review the service, income generated and staffing levels at a future date. Mr Lloyd explained that this remains the case going forward, but in the meantime, it was recommended that the Authority reimplement car parking charges and review the updated position after a minimum of 12 months to determine where enforcement resources are needed most.

During the course of the meeting, a Member also highlighted that the re-introduction of charges might result in people attempting to park elsewhere for free, which could lead to increased demand on available CPE resources, and he welcomed the proposed review of the changes after a 12 month period, in view of the issues this could create for residents living on the periphery of town centres.

A Member referred to the considerable level of income generated from car-parking charges during 2018-19 (in the region of £400k) and indicated their support for Option 2 of the report (First 2 hours 40p with subsequent hours at the existing tariff), suggesting that this surplus could be used to offset the increased budget shortfall. Several other Members also expressed their support for the cheaper Option 2 rate and were of the view that this could provide an incentive for visitors to town centres.

In response, Mr Lloyd explained that there is a significant backlog of maintenance regarding Council-owned car parks which will require a large amount of funding and will exceed any available monies in the funding pot. Mr Lloyd emphasised the need for the Council to invest in the longer-term in regards to its parking strategies and that it remains unknown whether parking behaviours will change once the new charging regime is introduced. Members were advised that a cheaper rate of parking will affect income levels, for which any surplus is invested into highways-related aspects of the service and these costs have been discussed at previous Scrutiny Committee meetings

Clarification was sought on the calculations used in the projected income losses set out at Section 8 of the report if either of the options for the new charging regime were to be approved. Mr Campbell explained that the estimates were based on historic ticket sales for one or two hours and the projected proportion of lost income that would be incurred. He highlighted that these estimates were based on pre-pandemic income and that it remains to be seen whether parking behaviours have changed since that time.

It was noted that Councillor Kevin Etheridge had requested to speak on the report, and he was then invited to address the Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Etheridge explained that in his own view, car parks within the county borough should continue to be free of charge, and he highlighted instances in the Blackwood area, where prior to the cessation of parking charges, local residents had experienced issues with business employees parking in side streets, which had led to a number of enforcement complaints being made. Councillor Etheridge also referred to inflation levels and the cost of living increase, and the results of the public survey where 31% of respondents stated that free parking would encourage them to stay for longer, and he expressed the need to keep charging to a minimum.

Councillor Etheridge asked the Scrutiny Committee to consider an amendment to the recommendations, for the charges to not come into effect until after the New Year 2023 to allow for the testing of the new charging equipment, and to demonstrate to the business community and customers that the Council is fully supportive of high streets and town centres.

Councillor Etheridge was thanked for his representation, with it noted that his request in respect of an amendment to the recommended implementation period had already been suggested by Officers earlier in the meeting as an additional recommendation for the Scrutiny Committee's consideration.

Having considered the findings and recommendations of the Caerphilly County Borough Council Car Parks Task and Finish Group, the Scrutiny Committee took each of the report recommendations separately and voted upon each of these in turn.

It was moved and seconded that Option 1 for reducing the initial hourly charge as set out at Recommendation 3.2.1 of the report be supported and forwarded to Cabinet for approval. By way of Microsoft Forms and verbal confirmation (and in noting there were 17 for, 7 against and 0 abstentions) this was agreed by the majority present.

- (i) RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that Option 1 (First hour 40p with subsequent hours at the existing tariff) as set out in Recommendation 3.2.1 of the report be implemented.

It was moved and seconded that Recommendation 3.3 of the report be supported and forwarded to Cabinet for approval. By way of Microsoft Forms (and in noting there were 25 for, 0 against and 0 abstentions) this was unanimously agreed.

- (ii) RECOMMENDED to Cabinet the continued suspension of car parking charges until the car park ticket machine software can be amended, estimated to be 8 to 10 weeks.

In view of Recommendation 3.2.1 (Option 1) of the report being supported, it was moved and seconded that Recommendation 3.4 (Option 1 - additional funding for the Highways Services budget totalling £83k to meet the income shortfall) be supported and forwarded to Cabinet for approval. By way of Microsoft Forms (and in noting there were 24 for, 1 against and 0 abstentions) this was agreed by the majority present.

- (iii) RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that in view of Recommendation 3.2.1 – Option 1 being supported by the Joint Scrutiny Committee, additional funding for the Highways Services budget totalling £83k as set out in Recommendation 3.4 of the report (Option 1) should be provided to meet the income shortfall as outlined in the Financial Implications section of the report.

It was moved and seconded that Recommendation 3.5 of the report be supported and forwarded to Cabinet for approval. By way of Microsoft Forms (and in noting there were 24 for, 0 against and 0 abstentions) this was unanimously agreed.

- (iv) RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that an impact report be provided to Scrutiny Committee 12 months after the implementation of the changes if they are approved.

An additional recommendation (3.6) was moved and seconded, for the re-introduction of charges in accordance with 3.2.1 above to be implemented from January 2023 if approved by Cabinet. By way of Microsoft Forms (and in noting there were 23 for, 1 against and 0 abstentions) this was agreed by the majority present.

- (v) RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that the re-introduction of charges in accordance with 3.2.1 above be implemented from January 2023 if approved.

The Chair thanked all Members for their in-depth discussions and contributions to the debate. He requested that the Scrutiny Committee's appreciation of the Task and Finish Group be placed on record, particularly for their time and effort taken in producing the report and its recommendations. Individual Members of the Scrutiny Committee also expressed their thanks to the Task and Finish Group for their efforts.

The meeting closed at 6.31 p.m.